Oria Kastro on Kythnos: analysis of the built remains

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Introduction

The Aegean Sea has always been a field of conflict but at the same time a civilisation workshop and meeting point of cultures. From the seventh century AD and throughout the Middle Ages the friction between the Byzantines and the Arabs at first, then the Latins, the Franks and the Ottoman Turks -along with the ever-present threat of piracy- led to the creation of an extended network of *kastra* (the Greek word for castles) on the islands of the Cyclades [1]. Although they were called castles, their form and structure bore few similarities to the contemporary Western European castles or even the continental Greek ones. The Cycladic *kastra* were small fortified settlements intended to meet primary needs of safety and defence. Over the centuries they have undergone many changes, growing dynamically as they suffered and recovered from violent captures and population fluctuations. Their use gradually declined when the Ottomans conquered almost all the Aegean (late sixteenth century) introducing a long period of relative peace.

Fig. 1. Arial view of Oria Kastro (C. Veloudaki).

Oria *Kastro* on Kythnos in the western Cyclades (Fig. 1) belonged to this type of insular strongholds. Built on a remote cliff in the north-western part of the island, it has traditionally been considered Kythnos' medieval capital, founded in the early Byzantine period (ca. seventh century AD) [2]. What we currently see, however, is predominantly the Latin phase as in the early thirteenth century Kythnos was among the islands conquered by Marco Sanudo and his comrades following the Fourth Crusade [3]. At first, the island was under the direct rule of the Duke of Naxos, but later it was ceded to the Gozzadini, a noble family from Bologna. The Gozzadini held Kythnos for almost three centuries (1336-1617) leaving their mark on its built environment [4].

The *Kastro* was finally captured and destroyed by the Ottomans in the 1570s [5]. Soon afterwards, the capital was moved to its contemporary inland location and Oria was abandoned never to be inhabited again, thus becoming a valuable fossil of the original layout of such settlements. While most other contemporary Aegean *kastra* gradually transformed into modern settlements, Oria remained 'frozen in time'. Despite its importance, the site has not been subject to systematic research so far.

This study is part of a wider attempt to document and analyse the remains of the *Kastro*. Through detailed surveys, it aims to record the range of building techniques in the most prominent and well-preserved buildings in an attempt to distinguish the possible western influences and the way these new Latin elements were integrated into the local building practice.

General description of the site

Oria *Kastro* was built in a naturally fortified location, on top of a rugged headland, at an altitude of 250 metres from sea level. At its more vulnerable parts, however, it was protected by double walls at different levels. Both the lower and the upper enceinte wall followed the contours of the terrain, effectively incorporating natural features, e.g. crags and cliffs to the defences. They were equipped with rows of loopholes and at certain points further strengthened with peripheral towers. A total of 137 buildings have been recorded in the intramural area, but that number would rise if systematic cleansings and excavations were ever to be conducted. (Fig. 2)

The structures, built with local rubble stones, have an average size of about 30 square metres and are arranged both along and at right angles to the contours of the slope. Apparently, the settlement evolved dynamically over the years, according to the needs of the inhabitants and not based on strict initial planning. The result was a tight residential complex, with a grid of horizontal and vertical streets and only few open spaces. The so-called '*piazza*' was the *Kastr*o's main and biggest open area [6]. Except for domestic structures, in Oria there were also public/administrative buildings, churches, cisterns as well as military and ancillary structures (storerooms, stables etc.). Due to lack of space, there were no buildings associated with agricultural production processing within the walls.

Fig. 2. Oria Kastro site plan (C. Veloudaki).

Form and typology

Apart from church 5 and its ancillary building (No27) that have been refurbished by the locals in the 1960s and are still in use today, all other structures lie in ruins. The superstructure is preserved only in a couple of cases, and although there are indications of two-storey as well as multi-storey structures (towers), no upper floors have survived. The poor state of preservation, the dense bush cover and the absence of archaeological research do not allow the drawing of firm conclusions regarding the exact use and typology of the buildings. On the other hand, the research was aided by the fact that all collapse lies still in situ, as Oria's inaccessible location prevented it from falling prey to a great deal of stone robbing. That allowed the recording and study of the remains and led to some preliminary observations regarding their form and basic features.

Domestic buildings

As far as the domestic buildings are concerned, three main types have been identified so far: free-standing oblong structures either single-cell or with partition walls, linear terraced structures and 'block houses', i.e. quadrilateral self-contained domestic units that probably extended over two or more storeys. Remains of staircases were found only in some cases in the western area of the settlement where the slope of the terrain is considerably steeper, and

the buildings had to compensate for it within their basements. External stone staircases about 1 metre wide led from the street level to the elevated entrance of the building. Internal staircases, either wooden or stone, connecting the buildings' different levels, although not documented, would certainly have existed.

Regardless of the type, it seems that most of the houses in the *Kastro* were covered with roofs. However, it is possible that in the case of two-storeyed buildings the ground floor was vaulted while the upper floor was covered with a roof. A few surviving beam sockets suggest that the roofs were most likely flat, supported by transverse beams that were bedded in the walls. Smaller rafters, schist plaques, and/or layers of reeds and seaweeds were probably placed upon the beams according to the local practice, and the whole was then covered by a thick layer of rammed earth. This construction was still in use in Kythnos and the other Cycladic islands until very recently [7]. Nevertheless, the existence of some pitched roofs in Oria covered with tiles, cannot be excluded.

Churches

There were at least 19 churches in Oria, numbered ch1 to ch19 on the site plan as in most cases there is no evidence of their names. Compared to the dwellings, they were better built and therefore better preserved nowadays. All of them are single-aisled with modest dimensions (average area of 40 square metres, spans 2.2-4 metres). Some are accompanied by one or more chapels. In most cases, the apse of the sanctuary protrudes from the main body of the church and is either semi-circular, stilted or segmental. Only in ch5 it is five-sided. There are also three double-apsed churches that have their apses inscribed in the width of the east wall (ch6, ch15).

Ch5 and ch9 are the biggest and most prominent churches of the *Kastro* and will be discussed in more detail further down. Both are covered with pointed barrel vaults, which suggests that they were originally Catholic. The denomination of the rest remains unclear. They were covered either with semi-circular vaults or with vaults constructed with the corbelling technique. Finally, a few remaining beam sockets suggest that at least a couple of chapels were covered with flat roofs.

Cisterns

Several cisterns in various forms and sizes (area ranging from 0.6 to 40 square metres, spans 0.8-4 metres) have been recorded in Oria. (Fig. 3) They were solidly built and as a result some of them are preserved almost intact. They are covered with barrel vaults that have a small rectangular opening (~35x60 centimetres) at the top. How the runoff water was channelled into the cisterns is unclear. The gutters and channels that would certainly have existed have either collapsed along with the upper floors of the buildings or are nowadays covered by rubble and soil build-up.

Fig. 3. Remains of cistern (c2) (C. Veloudaki).

Defensive structures

Except for the walls and their peripheral towers, in the *Kastro* there are three more structures that seem to have had defensive character (No33, 35, 46-47). (Fig.2) Positioned at strategic locations buildings No33 and 35 have almost square floor plans and thick walls bonded with mortar. Presumably one of them was the so-called *donjon*, the central tower that since the Late Byzantine era formed the castle's last line of defence, to which the defenders would resort when the enemies entered the town. Buildings No46-47 most likely corresponded to the lord's fortified residence. Even though they were solidly built, the state of preservation of all defensive buildings is particularly poor. It is possible that they were all deliberately destroyed after the fall of the town to the Ottomans [8].

Openings and niches

Regardless of the size or use of the building, the openings of the entrances across the settlement range between 0.9-1 metres with only few exceptions. Most of the door lintels have collapsed nowadays and only in two churches is the door opening completely preserved. The dimensions of the windows, where they survive, vary (width: 0.15-0.9 metres). In most cases, the opening got wider towards the inner face of the wall to allow the natural light in. Many buildings had niches of various dimensions built into the walls for storage purposes. Irrespective of their size, all preserved openings (doors, windows, niches and cabinets, cistern openings etc.) were made entirely out of stone. Presumably their size was determined not only by the use of each building but also by the availability of suitable stone slabs.

Decorative features

Oria does not preserve many decorative features. Except for a few marble *spolia* which were incorporated into some important buildings, there are barely any dressed stones bearing engravings or decorations. One possible explanation could be that the castle housed a rather poor community, with limited resources. The only buildings that received some extra care were the religious ones. Therefore nowadays, the only samples of stone-made cornices with mouldings or other kinds of decorative elements are found in the churches. On the other hand, it is always possible that there were more, but given the long-term abandonment of the site, they were either reused by the locals or taken away by visitors as souvenirs.

Building materials and techniques

Kythnos is a relatively poor island with limited resources, compared to the bigger Cyclades (e.g. Naxos or Paros). Its landscape is rocky and barren with barely any woodland. The only material found in abundance is stone; the island's ground is composed of various types of crystalline slates (metamorphic rock) with intervening marble horizons [9]. This lack of variety in raw materials is reflected in Oria's remains which are rather poor, built almost exclusively with local rubble stones. Timber was used sparingly, and mortar was reserved only for important public buildings (churches and cisterns) and the circuit walls. Apparently, imported building materials were a rare luxury, so building methods and techniques were very local with only few exceptions that will be analysed further down.

Masonry

For the building of Oria were used local gneiss shale, poros, and a few marble *spolia*. The gneiss shale is a hard and durable rock that is difficult to dress. It exists in abundance in the *Kastro* area, so it was used for all masonries and vaults. As a result, the settlement is nowadays fully integrated into the natural landscape. Originally, however, it would have looked very different as the exterior of most buildings was rendered making them visible from afar.

Poros (coquina) is a porous and soft stone, that can be very easily dressed, becoming suitable for decorative details. It was brought to the *Kastro* from a small quarry about 4.5 kilometres away. Nevertheless, it is not very durable therefore it was used only in specific cases, mainly in churches. Architectural features such as cornices, lintels or the voussoirs of the arch of the sanctuary, which were intended to be dressed or carved, were made of poros blocks and remained uncoated.

There are several marble pieces in the settlement, embedded mainly in public buildings. They are ancient or Early Christian *spolia*, parts of columns or other architectural fragments that were either found in situ or brought to the *Kastro* from another site. The incorporation of spolia into new buildings was common practice in the Middle Ages and can also be observed in other contemporary *kastra* in the Cyclades presumably both for utilitarian and symbolic reasons, i.e. attempting to add prestige to the new structure [10].

All walls were constructed with naturally occurring or roughly hewn rubble stones and their width ranges from 0.45 to 2.5 metres. They were roughly coursed and although through-stones (headers) connecting the two faces of the walls were scarce, more regularly hewn headers and stretchers were usually used at the corners. Small, flat

stones and occasionally pottery sherds were used as pinnings for coursing and stability. Wooden reinforcements have not been found.

In many cases, the buildings' walls that faced downslope were considerably thicker than the rest in order to retain the structure and bear effectively the thrusts of the vaults. Occasionally, particular buttressing walls were added in the interior of the buildings to reinforce failing or problematic areas (e.g. bulging or out of plumb walls and cracked vaults). In two churches (ch6, ch12), a whole second masonry skin was added presumably to act against the lateral forces of the roof.

Vaults

All barrel vaults, regardless of their form, were built with roughly hewn rubble stones bonded with limestone mortar. Their thickness ranged from 30 to 38 centimetres. The surviving beam sockets in the walls indicate that they were constructed using wooden forms. In the case of pointed barrel vaults, a certain sophistication in their strengthening has been noted with the use of buttressing arches. These arches were carried either on pilasters or consoles that projected slightly from the inner face of the long walls. The buttressing function they provided was to increase the width of the wall to better contain the thrust from the roof; a minor expression of hierarchy and sophistication in the structural performance of the wall and vault system often found in Western churches of the period. The extrados of the vault was covered with a symmetrical pitched slate-covered roof, its ridge running along the building's axis.

Although mostly collapsed nowadays, it seems that several vaults in Oria were constructed with the corbelling technique, i.e. each course of stone would project a little inwards from the course below, gradually diverging from the vertical, resulting in a narrow opening at the top, easily spanned with a slab. The width of the opening was determined by the length of the available slabs, yet in this case it would not easily have exceeded a total of 1.5 metres. A thick layer of rammed earth was applied on top and the whole provided the necessary load to stabilise the corbelling, without the need to strengthen the spandrels of the vault. (Fig. 4) This roofing method was less durable compared to the one using centring, however, it saved greatly on the use of timber and mortar. It was widespread in the Aegean area during the Middle Ages not only for religious but also for domestic and rural buildings [11].

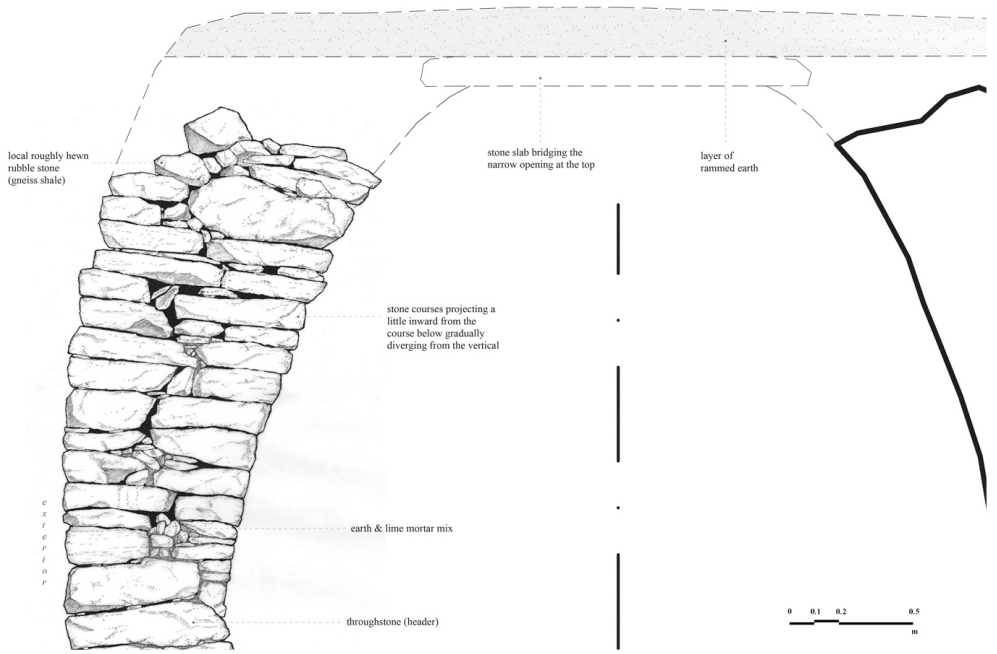

Fig. 4. Vault in Oria built with the corbelling technique (C. Veloudaki).

Timber

Timber beams were used for the roofing of the buildings that were not vaulted. For smaller and humbler structures local timber, the so-called *'fides'* (local name for *Juniperus turbinate*), would most likely have been used. According to the local tradition, *fides* grew in abundance on Kythnos in the Middle Ages and even nowadays there is a small area overgrown with that small tree near the *Kastro*. Although quite hard and durable, *fides* hardly ever grow more than 5 metres high and their trunk is thin and twisty. Maybe this is the reason why the span of most rooms in the *Kastro* ranges between 1.5 and 4 metres. Imported timber, suitable for bridging larger openings, would have been used for larger and more prominent buildings, e.g. the Gozzadini residence. No timber parts are preserved to-day in Oria, possibly due to the fire that according to the local stories followed the castle's fall [12]. It is equally possible, however, that all useable and valuable building materials were gradually taken away by the inhabitants when they relocated to the new capital.

Bonding materials

Most of the *Kastro*'s walls were constructed using either drystone techniques or earth and possibly clay as a bonding material. (Fig. 5) Lime mortar, which was presumably more difficult to produce due to the lack of timber as fuel, was reserved for special buildings such as churches, cisterns and the perimeter walls. In some cases, clay was mixed with lime mortar while in others mortar was applied only on the external face of a building to seal the earth and clay bonding within. White lime mortar was also used in the vault construction for binding the voussoirs together. Insulation was achieved by a layer of lime mortar on the vault extrados, followed by a thick

layer of pink hydraulic mortar with brick inclusions (~1.5-2.5 centimetres). Finally, another layer of white mortar (~1.5 centimetres) was applied to secure the roof slates. (Fig.6)

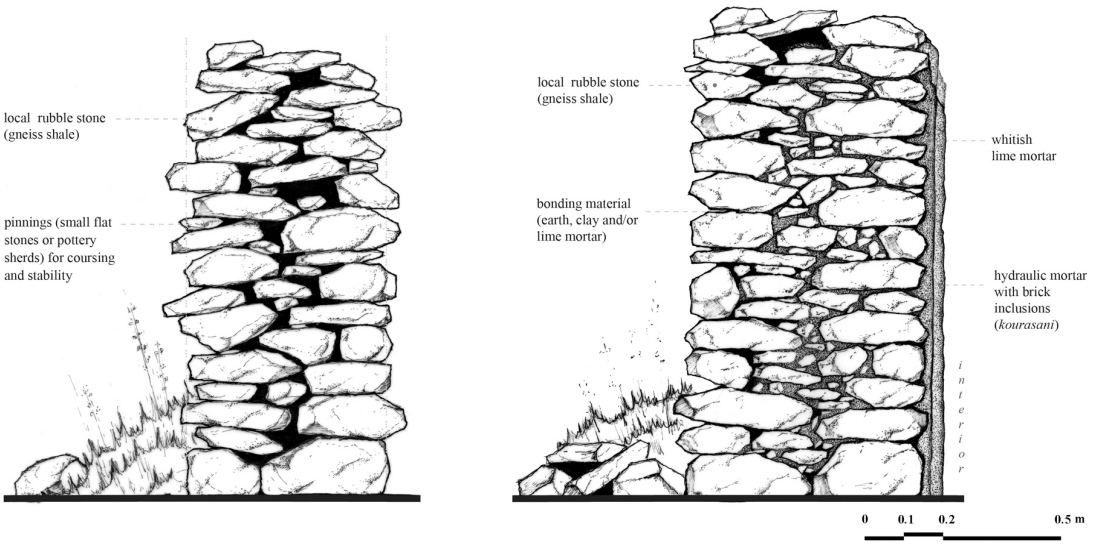

Fig. 5. Drystone wall (left) and bonded cistern wall (right) (C. Veloudaki)

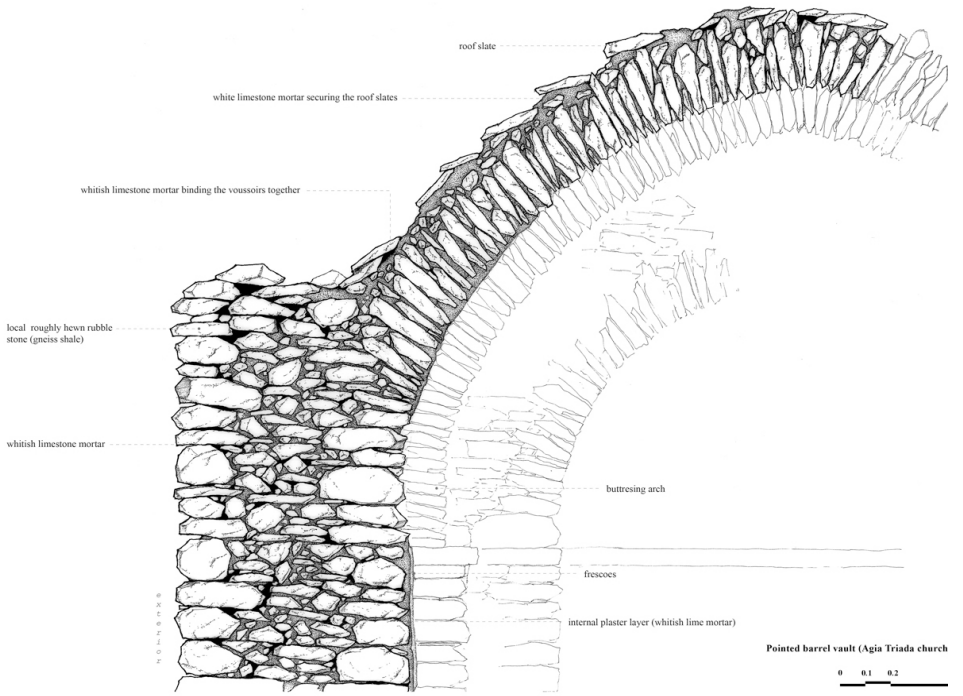

Fig. 6. Pointed barrel-vault (C. Veloudaki).

Hydraulic mortar (the so-called *kourasani*) was also used in the interior of the cisterns to render them watertight. (Fig. 5) Given that the stone blocks were unworked and irregular in shape, both the interior and the exterior of the most prominent private and public buildings were coated with layers of whitish lime mortar. Except for being aesthetically more pleasing, plaster would prevent the clay and earth bonding from being washed out.

Case studies

Ch5 and ch9 are two of the settlement's best-preserved and most recognisable buildings and were therefore chosen to be studied in more detail. Their pointed vaults along with some other features (holy water font etc.) identify them as Latin establishments. Although the materials used for their construction were local, the introduction of western forms and building techniques as well as an attempt for sophistication are evident. Along with the lord's manor, these two structures would have stood out from the rest for their clear geometry and good building quality. In the absence of relevant records, it is unclear whether they were made by masons brought in by the new lords, either from Naxos or even Venice itself, or by local builders probably under the guidance of a Latin master mason.

Panagia Kareleoussa (ch5)

According to the sources, *Panagia Kareleoussa* (Our Lady of Mercy) was the *Kastro*'s cathedral [13]. Most likely it was the first Latin church of Oria, erected shortly after Kythnos was incorporated to the Aegean Duchy in the early thirteenth century to establish the new order and cater the needs of the first Catholic inhabitants. (Fig. 7) It is also the only building that continued to be in use after the fall of the *Kastro*. In the early eighteenth century it was turned into an Orthodox church and since then is has undergone at least two major refurbishments. Despite the modern interventions, the basic features of the church remain intact.

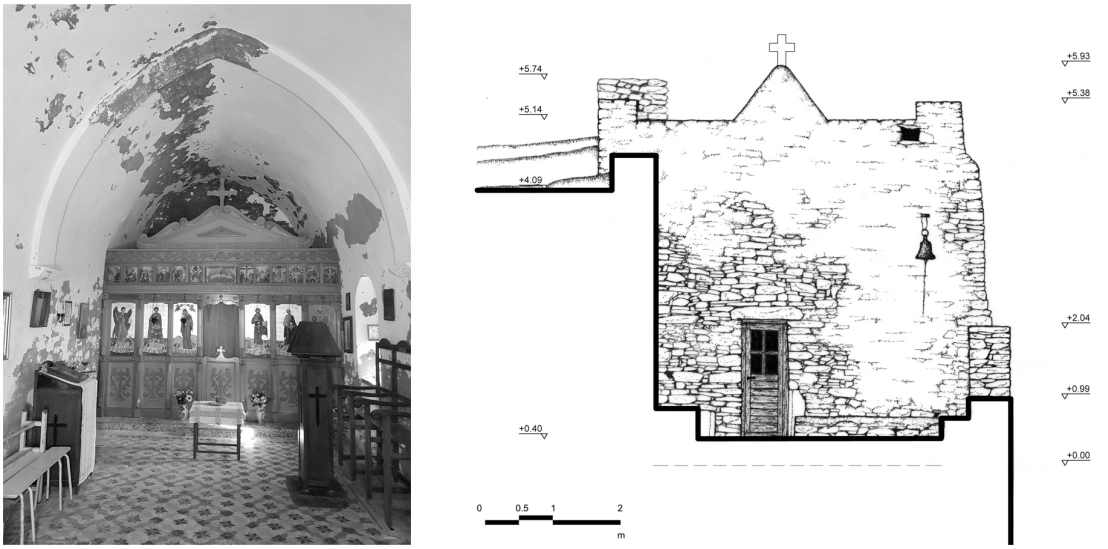

Fig. 7. Kareleoussa interior and west elevation (C. Veloudaki).

Kareleoussa is a single-aisled building with internal dimensions of ~9x4 metres, which correspond approximately to 26x11.5 Venetian feet (1 *piede* = 0.348 metres). It was built with roughly hewn medium-sized rubble stones bonded with white lime mortar. Smaller blocks were used as pinnings to achieve a rudimentary coursing. The church was coated both externally and internally. Given that it was a key part of the upper-level fortifications, its walls are of different thickness ranging from 0.7 metres on the west side to 2.4 metres on the east. The construction, especially on the exposed south and east sides, is more elaborate using bigger, regularly hewn quoins. Semi-finished headers and stretchers were also used for all the openings.

The nave was accessed through a central opening on the west side. In the south wall were two identical, symmetrically placed, arched windows. Their plan (widening both towards the interior and the exterior) is unique for the *Kastro* and shows some degree of refinement. The sanctuary apse is semi-circular with a poros stone cornice and a small window. The voussoirs on the face of the apse are also made from dressed poros blocks. Although currently covered with a coarse cement layer, all hewn poros features would originally have remained uncoated in contrast to the rest of the interior. On the outside, the apse has a rather irregular form. Its base is rectangular, as in other contemporary Catholic churches (e.g. the cathedral of *Apano Kastro* on Naxos [14]), while the upper part is five-sided.

However, the most prominent western element of the church is its pointed barrel vault. It is about 30 centimetres thick and its clear geometry suggests that it was built with a wooden formwork. A buttressing arch carried on consoles was placed in the middle of the building's long side to strengthen the vault. Since the 1960s the vault is covered with a concrete layer, yet it is safe to assume that originally it had a symmetrical pitched slate-covered roof.

Agia Triada (ch9)

The exact building chronology of *Agia Triada* is also unknown, yet the remains of some early fourteenth-century frescoes in its interior that belong to a second building phase give us a *terminus ante quem* for its erection [15]. The church is of similar form and dimensions to *Kareleoussa*; it is single-aisled with internal dimensions 7.12x3.2 metres (~20.5x9 Venetian feet). (Figs 8-9) The walls were built with medium-sized, roughly hewn and coursed rubble stones bonded with lime mortar. Bigger and more regularly hewn quoins were used at the corners. All walls are 90 centimetres wide except for the east which is 65 centimetres.

The west elevation of the building is almost gone; however, the remains of the entrance are still visible in the middle of the west wall. In the south wall, there is a small pointed arched window, which narrows outwards. The sanctuary apse is semi-circular measuring 1.95 metres in diameter. At its centre there was a small window formed entirely with dressed stones. Its marble lintel was decorated with a carved pointed arch. (Fig.8) Dressed poros stones were not used anywhere in *Agia Triada*, so maybe the interior was all coated right from the very beginning.

The church was covered with a pointed barrel-vault supported by two buttressing arches. In this case they stand on four pilasters that project slightly from the face of the walls. Strong white lime mortar was used for binding the voussoirs together. A layer of crushed-tile mortar was applied on the vault extrados for insulation and then the whole was covered with a symmetrical pitched slate-covered roof. The building was coated externally with a heavy layer of whitish plaster. Occasionally some pottery sherds were used as pinnings and a few of them were also mixed into the plaster.

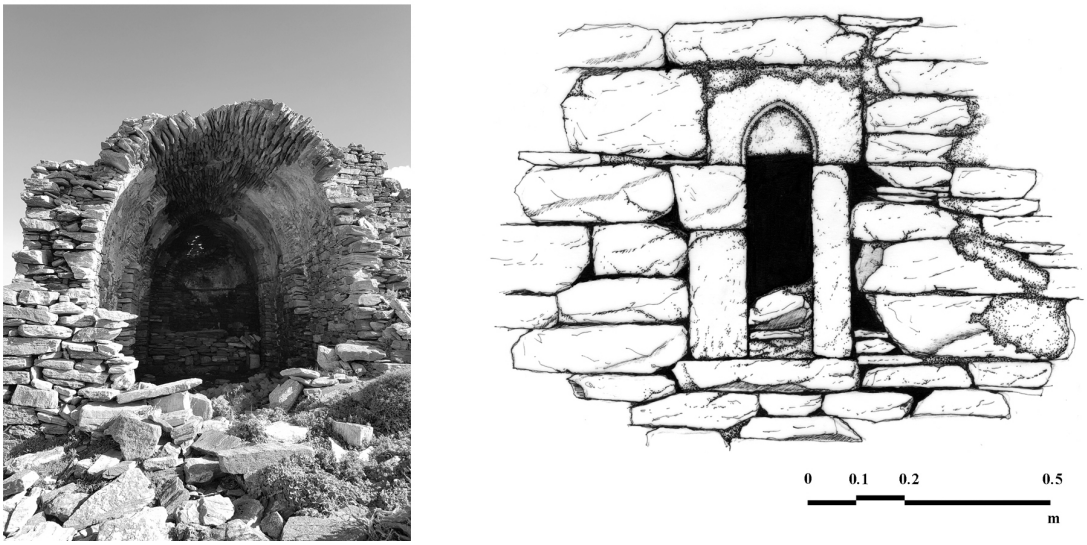

Fig. 8. Agia Triada west elevation and window detail (C. Veloudaki).

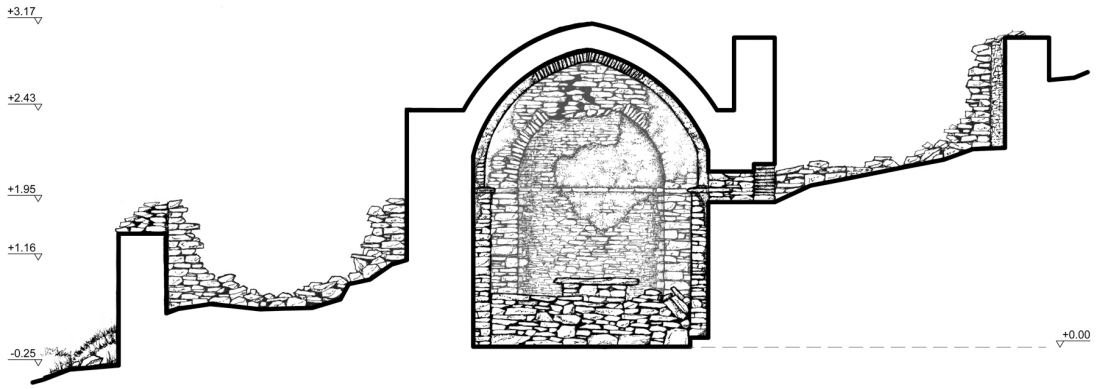

Fig. 9. Agia Triada cross section (C. Veloudaki).

Conclusions

As shown from the analysis above, the structures of Oria are all rather basic. There are no elaborate buildings with indicative floorplans nor great variations in the structures' forms and sizes. So, should this scarcity be attributed to the lack of ambition and means on the part of the Latins, the inherent limitations of the site itself or the difficult circumstances of the island in general?

Our knowledge on the building tradition of the previous era on Kythnos is admittedly very limited. Except for the remains of three-aisled Early Christian basilica which has recently been excavated but not yet published in detail [16] and a ruined countryside church (*Theotokos*) that is presumed to be Byzantine there are hardly any buildings securely dated to that era [17]. The latter appears to have been Orthodox and although there is no indication of its erection date, it is very similar to the *Kastro* churches. *Theotokos* is single-aisled with modest dimensions (area:

~20 square metres). The sanctuary apse is semi-circular and protrudes from the main body of the building. The masonry was built with roughly worked rubble stones bonded with lime mortar. Bigger quoins were placed at the corners and big ceramic tiles were used as pinnings. Although collapsed nowadays, it seems that the structure was covered with a vault built with the corbelling technique. The only difference from the Oria churches lies in the extended use of spolia and the existence of some typically Byzantine decorative features (dentil course).

Fig. 10. Rural building in the vicinity of Oria covered with corbelled vault (C. Veloudaki).

All around the island there are also many rural buildings that were constructed with the same building methods. (Fig.10) It is possible that some of them predate the Latin era, however, their dating has never been attempted. In any case, it seems that the new forms and building techniques that were introduced by the new rulers in the thirteenth century were largely adapted to the local vernacular standards as the limited availability of materials and possibly of skilled masons restricted the Latin lord's options. The limitations of the topography i.e. the site's inaccessible location and restricted building space would also have played a crucial role. Nevertheless, the Latins tried to introduce some western elements (pointed vaults and arches) and a certain degree of sophistication (clear geometry, consistent use of headers and stretchers etc.) mainly in the religious buildings and possibly their residence.

It appears, however, that this attempt was made predominantly at the beginning of their rule as both case studies date most likely to the thirteenth century. As the years passed by, the new designs apparently weakened in favour of the local building traditions. The rest of the intermural churches are of lesser building quality (smaller dimensions, thinner uncoursed and poorly bonded walls etc.) and are covered either with vaults built with the corbelling technique or with flat roofs.

But does this assimilation to the local standards show minor ambitions of the Gozzadini? The archaeology of the Latin Aegean is poor in general, as there are only few studies on similar sites in the medieval Cyclades, with very limited analysis of the building fabric and technology. However, if we compare Oria to *Apano Kastro* on Naxos, the capital of the Duchy, we realise that the two are not so different. *Apano Kastro* was a purely Latin establishment built in the late thirteenth century by the Duke of Naxos. The site lies now in ruins and has been partly studied by Dr Vionis [18]. The buildings seem to be of comparable form and size to those of Oria; again, some western stylistic elements have been superimposed, nevertheless, all structures were built mainly with local materials and practices.

Although more studies are required to allow a critical overview of Oria in comparison to other medieval *kastra* in the Cyclades, it seems that the continuation of well-established local building practices was very common not only in the Aegean but also in other places in the Eastern Mediterranean that witnessed periods of interchange and movements of population that resulted in cultural interactions [19].

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